New Francophone African and Caribbean Theatres. John Conteh-Morgan with Dominic Thomas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xviii + 208 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Following a *coup d'état* in the African country of Mutulufwa, Corporal Nnikon Nniku seizes power and proclaims himself Field Marshal. (In Mutulufwa, military titles are kept in a basket and handed out like sweets.) Following a lurid coronation ceremony—featuring shrieking and erotic dancers in bright plumage, “boudoum-boudoum”-sounding drums, fire-eating sorcerers, and nose-pierced warriors—the Maréchal unleashes his megalomaniacal new ideological program of “Nnikonnicism” whose central agenda is sociopolitical regression, notably the criminalization of all work and the general ruination of the state’s infrastructure. This is accompanied by the lubricious Marshal’s recourse to gratuitous violence and terror; his most profound desire is that “everyone, whether they eat, sleep, shit or screw, laugh or die . . . at my will.”

Such is the nightmarish dystopia of *coups* and tyranny depicted in the Congolese Tchicaya U Tam’si’s 1979 play *Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, prince qu’on sort*. The fictional state of Mutulufwa means, after all, “those destined to die” in the Lingala language. In this play we encounter the chilling phenomenon of “necropolitics” where the ultimate expression of authority resides in the power to dictate human life or death.

The piece is a fascinating example of a Francophone postnationalist play’s drama of political critique which depicts a world where humans are desecrated as mere commodities. Gone the reverence for a charismatic, sage father of the nation; gone the idealistic or utopian striving for origins or archetypes as cherished by certain purveyors of nationalist theater in the period of decolonization.

Rather, the Marshal’s ancestralism is ridiculed, and instead of cultural authenticity, we have tacky stereotypical folklore as exemplified in the coronation. This is a surreal, grotesque world of excess and fantasy, strongly reminiscent of *Ubu Roi* (cf. *Ubu and the Truth Commission* in Anglophone African theater). The monstrous is coupled with the bitter sardonic laugh of carnivalesque derision and parody. Carnavalesque, too, the punning, scatology, and obscenity throughout the play. Despite the “ni” disclaimers in

his names, Nnikon Nniku, the Marshal's identity is aptly signified by *con* (idiot, prick, and also the female genitalia) and *cul* (arse).

Le destin glorieux is one of nine plays analyzed in insightful detail in *New Francophone African and Caribbean Theatres* by the late John Conteh-Morgan who was the pre-eminent scholar in his field in the United States. The manuscript of this posthumously published book has been ably completed by Dominic Thomas. A richly informative introductory chapter provides cogent and assured contextualizing, rehearsing the legacy of earlier playwrights and avant-garde practitioners from which the plays and politico-cultural debates of the succeeding generations, studied here, develop.

The vast majority of these plays—which vary in tone, register, genre, and style—chart a growing disenchantment with post-colonial society. The Guadeloupean novelist and playwright Simone Schwarz-Bart focuses on the exacerbating socio-economic disparities of the global economy in her ground-breaking 1987 play *Ton beau capitaine*, a poignant and lyrical treatment of migration and exile. Here, the Haitian migrant worker Wilnor has spent years toiling in the cane fields of Guadeloupe. He and his wife Marie-Ange communicate through “cassette-letters.” Yet Wilnor’s dreams of a contented retirement, in which he is the captain of his life, his wife, his home, are dashed when he learns from his wife’s own recorded voice that she is to bear the child of another man.

Wilonor is a representative wanderer, one of the wretched of the earth. His very country which had once so often inspired plays of heroic nationalism stands here and elsewhere as a metaphor for distress and disillusionment. Whereas for some, not least postcolonial émigré intellectuals, exile and emigration connote a creative and liberating nomadism, Wilnor is rather enslaved in his migration, a condition further underlined by maritime metaphors that dimly evoke the slave trade. “Separation is a big ocean which muddles everything.”

Yet in a form of mysterious epiphany made possible by Marie-Ange, whose infidelity he forgives, Wilnor conquers his self-doubt and achieves a form of calm and capacious understanding of their common fate. “You over there and me here . . . it’s all the same,” she says. In this superb, minimalist, and claustrophobic play, which draws upon Haitian spirituality and uses dance and ritual to go beyond language and create extra resonances, Wilnor comes to understand that his wife is as much a victim as he; he realizes her own pain and agency.

Another play that engages with cultural trauma, this time in modern Africa, is the Cameroonian playwright Werewere Liking's *Les mains veulent dire* [literally "the hands mean"]. As one of her emblematic ritual dramas, this play seeks to rescue ritual from ossified folkloric display and to enact onstage a healing indigenous rite which will re-suture Africa's amputated memory, leading to cultural autonomy and spiritual and imaginative emancipation. The play is remarkable for its scenographic richness to be apprehended by all the senses.

Other plays discussed here instrumentalize epic narrative, folktale and oral story-telling, and festive culture. Tchicaya U Tam'si's 1987 play *Le bal de Ndinga*, "one of the most successful French-language plays from Africa ever written," has at its heart a tragic lament for a decolonization gone sour.

A final chapter examines the most recent Francophone theater in the age of globalization where the colonial encounter and its aftermath have been expanded to encompass a gamut of contemporary material (itself deserving of detailed study). Conteh-Morgan devotes lucid discussion to such issues as cultural hybridity, and self-reflexivity in this "theatre of crossings." Nevertheless, I was most impressed by the way he takes issue with some of the new dramatists' "universalist" assumptions and their pooh-poohing of the "folklore theatre" of their predecessors. With devastating precision, such "universalism" is identified as all too often a rootless and complicit mimicry of a western neo-imperial, globalizing discourse.

In this fascinating and exciting study, the late John Conteh-Morgan succeeded admirably in bringing to Anglophone attention a precious body of Francophone African and Caribbean theater—a rich seam for further enquiry, comparative not least. And I for one am keenly anticipating seeing several of these plays translated from the page to the English-speaking stage.

Philip Crispin

Department of Drama and Music (Drama), University of Hull

Hull HU6 7RX, U.K.

p.crispin@hull.ac.uk